

## Abstract

This thesis examines the theme of childhood in the contemporary West Indian novel, finding in the child a vulnerable and creative agent which illuminates the ethos and dynamics of Caribbean society. The child's position in his family and culture illustrates implicitly and explicitly the complexities of class and race, the burdensome colonial inheritance, the quality of personal relationships, and the Caribbean self-image.

Childhood in Naipaul's novels is a vehicle for his tragic vision of cultural fragmentation; his children are victims of corrupt and atrophying traditions, adrift in a capricious and loveless universe.

Children in Lamming's novels have important and often dual symbolic functions. On the one hand they exist in specific social-political settings, as indictments of a culture structured by class and race. On the other they are poetic metaphors of intuitive wisdom and of the inevitable isolation of the human condition.

Jean Rhys' Antoinette in Wide Sargasso Sea shares the isolation and alienation of Naipaul's children. The

hopelessness of her situation is exacerbated by her position in the male-oriented social structure through which she passively gravitates towards despair, madness and death.

The priveleged children of several "plantocracy" novels are examined; these novels show, with varying insight and pathos, that no one escapes the corruption and dehumanization of the colonial legacy.

The boys of Michael Anthony's novels stand out by their capacity to give and receive affection. Loved and loving, they are nourished by emotional ties which enable them to withstand the poverty, grief and cynicism with which life confronts them.

The thesis concludes with a brief survey of juvenile literature, a relatively recent phenomenon; this includes both novels written specifically for children, and novels with appeal for young people. The response of fictional West Indian children to their environments seems to proceed less from the authors' social position than from their emotional orientation - a spectrum that spans responses from tragic alienation to positive and active involvement.